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Dear Court Leaders:

Welcome to *Dialogue*, a handbook developed by the Judicial Council of California's Special Task Force on Court/Community Outreach. This resource, created for the purpose of assisting courts in developing and enhancing court and community collaboration efforts, includes an extensive ethics analysis, a discussion of community justice initiatives, and practical tools, samples, and resources to help courts immediately take action in public outreach efforts. To introduce this work to you, we wanted to share some of the reasons we believe so strongly in the importance of court and community collaboration.

Public Trust and Confidence. As the public's trustee of our justice system, the courts' role transcends resolving disputes justly, expeditiously, and economically. The courts' role is, ultimately, to preserve the rule of law — a basic underpinning of our system of government. To preserve the rule of law requires the active support and confidence of the public that we serve. In recent years, the court system, along with all other branches of government, has experienced a significant decline in the level of public trust and confidence. As an institution we must take an active role in enhancing the public's perception of the court system, to let people know that we deserve their trust and support. Now more than ever, we need to educate and sensitize the public to the mission of the courts and demonstrate our commitment to fairness, to equal justice, and to the rule of law. Public understanding leads to public confidence in courts and public respect and support for the justice system.

Dialogue. An ongoing court and community dialogue is an essential element in our strategy to maintain the vitality of the courts and the effectiveness of the judicial branch as an institution. By being actively involved, not only do judges and court administrators contribute to the perception that the courts are responsive to community needs and input, they also become more attuned to the realities of their constituents' experience. In short, community involvement enhances the public service we provide because exposure to community concerns helps us to do our jobs more effectively.

Court outreach to the community is also enlightened self-interest. We can use community collaboration to ensure that the public distinguishes courts from discretionary government functions. We can emphasize the notion of judicial independence and the role the courts serve in maintaining social order. Active community outreach can give people a sense of ownership and a stake in adequate funding for the courts that will help ensure that the independence of the courts is maintained. Strong community ties can help the courts avoid and weather crises and perceptions brought on by sensationalized trials, the occasional incidences of judicial misconduct, and other isolated events. These ties with the community will strengthen the public's confidence in the judges serving in their community.

Respecting Difference. While community outreach has many benefits, it is not risk free. At community forums judges may encounter demands that are inconsistent with their judicial role. Some judicial officers are more comfortable than are others in this setting. For those who are not comfortable personally engaging in court and community collaboration activities, it is appropriate to decline involvement. But it is important to support those members of the bench who choose to be involved. The judge who personally participates is not the only beneficiary of community outreach. Ultimately, a public that perceives that the courts are receptive to its needs, responsive to community problems, and engaged in an ongoing dialogue is far more likely to be supportive of judges and the courts as an institution.

Rising to the Challenge. We commend this work to you and urge all courts to actively and enthusiastically seek ways to open dialogue with their communities for the benefit of the public we serve.

Sincerely,



RONALD M. GEORGE
Chief Justice of California and
Chair of the Judicial Council



VERONICA SIMMONS MCBETH
Presiding Judge of the Los Angeles
Municipal Court and Chair of the Special
Task Force on Court/Community Outreach